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**Citation for published version:**

Rosie, M 2015, 'Scotland: All Change?', *Scottish Affairs*, vol. 24, no. 4, pp. 383-388.  
<https://doi.org/10.3366/scot.2015.0091>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.3366/scot.2015.0091](https://doi.org/10.3366/scot.2015.0091)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Scottish Affairs

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## *Scotland: All Change?*

**Michael Rosie**

(Special editor for this issue of *Scottish Affairs*)

### **Abstract**

Two years – 2014 and 2015 – saw remarkable and profound developments in Scotland's political history. This introduction to a Special Issue of *Scottish Affairs* which examines these outlines Scotland's tumultuous years, why they are inevitably puzzling, and why they are perhaps unresolvable. It then notes key and salient points from the various contributions in the volume.

### **Key Words**

Scotland, Independence, Referendum, General Election, Nationalism, Unionism

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What will future historians make of Scotland in 2014 and 2015? The referendum, the 'democratic surge' that followed, and the SNP landslide in the 2015 general election seem to have, perhaps fundamentally, shifted the nature and tone of Scottish politics. A Nationalist party, so long supporting actors in someone else's political play, are now Scotland's leading players. Having led Scotland towards, if not quite to, secession in 2014, the SNP saw an unprecedented surge in membership and won 50% of the Scottish vote in 2015, and 56 of 59 seats. As Lindsay Paterson recently noted in this journal: 'the referendum turns out to be more intriguing in its aftermath than the rather familiar debates that led up to the vote' (Paterson, 2015: 23). A future referendum on independence does not seem at all unlikely. Many commentators – within and outwith Scotland – seem quite bewildered by what has happened since 2011, and particularly by these last two tumultuous years.

Yet there is no reason why anyone should have expected contemporary events in Scotland to be immediately comprehensible. Which *national question* – the problem of how national identity should (or should not) intersect with political power – was anything other than complex? As Sellar & Yeatman reminded us, Gladstone 'spent his declining years trying to guess the answer to the Irish Question; unfortunately, whenever he was getting warm, the Irish secretly changed the Question' (1930:107). Lord Palmerston described the Schleswig-Holstein question, upon which global political history turned in 1864, as: 'so complicated, only three men in Europe have ever understood it. One was Prince Albert, who is dead. The second was a German professor who became mad. I am the third and I have forgotten all about it' (quoted in Thaler 2009: 27).

How might we, then, understand the contemporary twists and turns in the *Scottish Question*? Where do recent events leave the politics in, and of, Scotland? This Special Issue focusses upon a tumultuous year from, roughly speaking, the final weeks of Scotland's independence referendum campaign, through the vote and its aftermath, down to the period immediately after the general election of 2015. In that sense it is offered as a companion piece to Volume 23, Issue 3 of this journal, which focussed upon *Scotland's Referendum*. Writing in July 2015 one already has the uneasy feeling that material presented here to our readers in the autumn will already have been taken over by subsequent events. 'Scotland', as noted before the referendum, 'does not stand still' (Rosie, 2014: 276). Nevertheless it seems imperative to capture just where we *seem* to be in the mid-summer of 2015, if only so as to help orient those future historians.

This volume comprises two discrete parts. The first tackles Scotland's tumultuous year as we approach the first anniversary of the independence referendum. It begins with **Meryl Kenny's** review of the historic gender aspects of the 2015 general election. Not only did 'dangerous women', not least First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, feature strongly in media coverage, but a record number of women MPs were returned. Far from this 'shattering the political "glass ceiling"', however, Kenny notes that 'the number of male MPs elected in 2015 alone outnumbers the total number of female MPs ever elected to the House of Commons' (Kenny, 2015: xx). Likewise the seeming 'gender-quake' in Scotland – 20 of the Scottish MPs returned were women – springs from political happenstance rather than from political design. Notably only a quarter of the candidates contesting Scottish seats for the major parties were female: 'The rise in the number of Scottish women MPs elected, then, is the result of the SNP electoral surge – the party selected 21 out of 59 candidates in 2015, and all but one of these women

were elected' (pxx). Real change in gender representation, Kenny argues, can only be achieved through legislative quotas.

**Eve Hepburn** explores how the issue of immigration was addressed by key actors in the 2014 referendum, not least how the welcoming tone of the SNP on immigration, particularly in the White Paper on independence (Scottish Government, 2013), contrasted with shrill accounts from Westminster. Hepburn notes that (across the political spectrum) the Scottish 'take' on immigration remains distinctive from that at a UK-level. This, plus the relative warmth of key minorities towards both Scottish identity and issues around self-determination, have ensured that the Scottish Question has remained broadly civic in tone and in substance. Indeed: 'to the surprise of many international commentators, the referendum in Scotland had very little to do with an essentialising and exclusivist culture' (Hepburn, 2015: xx).

**Maddie Breeze** et al then address a convenient, though deeply flawed, explanation for the support for independence and the 'democratic surge' enjoyed by Yes parties *despite* their defeat in 2014. Many commentators – novelists, journalists, (retired) academics – have sought to simplify these complex events as some kind of dangerous spasm of irrational and emotional nationalism led by cynical apparatchiks. Breeze et al argue that this springs from a profound misunderstanding of nationalism, and a blindness to the forms of nationalism which Michael Billig (1995) classed as 'banal'. Here we hear the voices of the youngest of Scotland's Yes voters expressing 'Outward-looking, internationalist visions' within 'a blurry spectrum where narratives of social justice blended with ideas of national identity' (Breeze et al, 2015:xx). 'Nationalism' in Scotland, it is clear, defies simplistic and polemical dismissal as 'irrational': it is a complicated, vexed and self-reflexive phenomenon.

To conclude this section, **Hector MacQueen** considers the case that could be made for a second chamber to the Scottish Parliament. In reviewing the legislative process in Scotland, MacQueen notes that whilst 'much has been done to address the concerns which might otherwise occupy a Scottish second chamber, nonetheless it cannot be contended that these are yet adequate or sufficiently strong'. The key issue here is that, despite the fine work of Holyrood's Parliamentary Counsel, the lack of scrutiny independent of the elective chamber makes 'genuinely self-critical 'second thought' or 'second opinion' processes less likely' (2015: xx). For MacQueen, "The case for the *functions* often performed by second chambers as a necessary element in a democratic polity is really uncontroversial. The question of whether a second chamber is *needed* to perform them is not" (pxx).

The second part of this Special Issue builds on the theme introduced in *Scotland's Referendum* – how are events in Scotland seen and understood elsewhere? **Keith Shaw** notes shifting reactions to the referendum and its aftermath in the English Borderlands, arguing that relief at the result 'quickly gave way to traditional fears of a more powerful Scotland' (Shaw, 2015: xx). Strikingly, assessment of events in Scotland might be leading to some deep thinking in Northern England, not least the North East. Scotland's tumultuous year has provoked 'a fundamental reappraisal of their own identity, collective aspirations and even made them doubt the future existence of the 'North East' as a coherent administrative, economic and political construct' (pxx)

**John Osmond** outlines the current challenges for party leaders in Wales, and how the 2014 referendum and 2015 General Election in Scotland may have fundamentally shifted how elite figures in Wales understand *their* national questions. In his analysis, Osmond notes that 'it is striking how far all three look to Scotland for inspiration, influence, or support' (2015: xx). A further factor, and one which will fundamentally shape politics in Wales, is that 'From a Welsh perspective, more than ever we appear to be at the mercy of events and decisions that will be made elsewhere' (pxx).

From across the Atlantic **Alan Mackie** and **Euan Hague** explore U.S. reactions to the 2014 Referendum result. 'American observers and commentators,' they note, 'recognized both the complexity of the issues and, despite the 'no' vote, that the question of Scottish independence has not been conclusively resolved' (2015: xx). Whilst they found that the referendum had enhanced American awareness of Scotland's politics, they also heard strong echoes of their research prior to the referendum: 'the parallel of Scottish secession equating to *America's* eighteenth-century revolution retains currency for many' (pxx – my emphasis. See also Hague & Mackie, 2014)

Finally **Nese Karahasan** unpacks how Scotland's referendum was covered by leading media commentators in the opposite corner of Europe: Turkey. Echoing the findings of several contributions to *Scotland's Referendum* (Dixon, 2014; Hague & Mackie, 2014; Ruggiu, 2014) Karahasan finds that it is primarily 'local' concerns that colour and shape media understandings of Scotland. Thus heightened Turkish sensitivities around the *Kurdish* Question profoundly (and negatively) shape understandings of the *Scottish* Question: 'Scotland's referendum is seen as "trouble", not only for the United Kingdom, but also for Turkey ... the contagious "virus" of independence could eventually spread to Kurds in Turkey' (Karahasan, 2015: xx).

It seems remarkable just how far Scotland has changed over this last tumultuous year. Yet perhaps we should not be entirely surprised. Lindsay Paterson has argued that the Scottish Question has long been a cycle of radical demands answered – eventually – through pragmatic compromise. Pragmatism and utopianism, he argues, represent 'two stories about Scotland in the Union, so different that they mark a fundamental divide, and yet so dependent on each other that they render that divide the most bitter of all' (Paterson, 2015: 25). To a great extent the 'answering' of the Scottish Question springs from, 'in time honoured fashion, Westminster and Whitehall ... making the British constitution up as they go along, piecemeal and responding to the pressure of events' (Osmond, 2015: xx). This, in turn, produces dissatisfaction in Scotland and a demand for further change to address the faults of the compromise.

It is likely, then, that any answer to our national question is simply another question. As Paterson concludes: 'whatever happens, the outcome will continue to be compromise, will continue to generate radical discontent, and thus will never settle the Scottish question to the satisfaction of anyone' (2015: 43). We hope that this issue of *Scottish Affairs*, in failing to 'solve' an unanswerable puzzle, at least asks some provoking questions.

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